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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 000994

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/27/2018
TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM KCRM UZ
SUBJECT: KARAKALPAKSTAN CASES AGAINST ACTIVISTS MOVING
SLOWLY

REF: TASHKENT 947

Classified By: Political Officer Tim Buckley for reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: On August 25 the trial against prominent human rights activist Akzam Turgunov started in Mangit but was immediately postponed after the judge decided that the attorneys required interpreters, a move described as "very surprising" by Dilorom Ishakova of the opposition Erk Party. In nearby Nukus, the trial of former Radio Free Europe journalist Salidjahon Abdurakhmanov stalled when the prosecutor called for the investigation to be reopened to explore allegations that the defendant was also drunk at the time of his detention. Contacts confirmed information reported on the independent website uznews.net, and we agree that the evidence against both defendants seems weak. Authorities are likely to grasp at technicalities and drag their feet on the trial proceedings, especially since both of the accused are in pre-trial detention. End summary.

Courtroom of Babel?

¶2. (C) Ishakova called the Embassy on August 24 to report that Turgunov's trial was scheduled to begin in the Karakalpakstan town of Mangit on August 25. The independent website uznews.net reported on August 26 that the court did convene but the trial was immediately postponed because the judge decided that the defendants' attorneys required interpreters. Turgunov's Tashkent-based lawyer Rustam Tulyganov reportedly did not speak sufficient Russian while co-defendant Hamza Salayev's ethnic Korean attorney Rem Yugay apparently did not speak Uzbek. Ishakova, who was in attendance, confirmed this decision and told poloff that it was a "very surprising" development, as the attorneys have already been working on the case for almost two months without any linguistic difficulties. She said Yugay even speaks the local Karakalpak dialect, which is closer to the Kazakh language than to Uzbek.

¶3. (C) The next court hearing has been scheduled for September 4, although Ishakova lamented that the round-trip

air ticket from Tashkent is very expensive and her group may not be able to afford to send her. She added that such quick hearings lacking in substance and delayed by technicalities limit the ability of activists to effectively monitor the case. She predicted that there will be "a maximum of two hearings" before there is another disruption -- someone will fall ill, a procedure will be called into question, etc. Ishakova recalled a similar controversial case in which the trial dragged on for nine months, and she expects authorities will be in no hurry to wrap up proceedings time time, either.

¶4. (C) Ishakova confirmed information in uznews.net that Turgunov was in high spirits, which she attributed to the large number of people (a "convoy") who turned out to show their support. Curiously, the judge mistook Ishakova for a BBC journalist and asked for her press credentials; she found it sadly comical but was allowed to remain once she convinced the court she was a citizen observer. [Uznews.net](http://uznews.net) quoted Ishakova as saying that the head of the court registry told her "Turgunov will get a long prison sentence even if BBC journalists have come to defend him in court."

Let's Investigate Some More

¶5. (C) Elsewhere in Karakalpakstan, in the remote northwest corner of Uzbekistan, the case against former Radio Free Europe journalist Abdurakhmanov stalled. Reftel reported that the investigation was complete and the trial would commence soon; however, uznews.net reported on August 17 that "another long break has been taken" and that the prosecutor's

office "seems not to know what to do with the materials from the investigation." On August 20 the same website reported that the case had been sent back to the police for additional investigation, particularly alleging that Abdurakhmanov must have been drunk when he was arrested in possession of narcotics. The article reported that the defense lawyer said that prosecutors ignored the fact that the investigation revealed no such evidence.

¶6. (C) Poloff spoke with Bahrom Abdurakhanov, the brother of the accused who was quoted in the two uznet.net articles, who confirmed the information. He reiterated to poloff that there was no positive test for drug or alcohol use at the time of his brother's arrest. [Uznews.net](http://uznews.net) noted that there were irregularities in the investigation, including the failure by police to collect fingerprints from the vehicle and packets of drugs or to interview attendants who worked at the parking lot where the accused regularly parked his vehicle. The article quoted Bahrom as saying "ignoring all details that favored the detainee and refusing to conduct a full investigation into lighter charges, the Nukus police instead brought a more serious charge." He continued that "this is nothing but a desire to imprison the journalist at any cost."

¶7. (C) Bahrom told poloff that, as of his most recent visit on August 25, his brother is in good health. He still has the services of an attorney and has been able to freely receive visitors at the jail.

Comment:

¶8. (C) uznews.net seems to be reporting reliable, accurate information about the criminal cases against Turgunov and Salidjahon Abdurakhmanov. In both cases the evidence against the defendants seems weak, perhaps putting more pressure on authorities to keep scrounging for more ways to spin the arguments for the prosecution. While officials reinvestigate, file new charges, and delay the proceedings, the accused remain in pre-trial detention and the Karakalpak courts will be in no hurry to wrap up the proceedings. We will continue to monitor the cases and raise them with high-level officials in the Government of Uzbekistan.